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VIEWING TURNOVER FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THOSE WHO REMAIN: THE --ETC(U)  
JAN 81 R T MOWDAY, R M STEERS, L W PORTER N00014-81-K-0026

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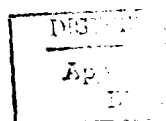
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6 Viewing Turnover from the Perspective of Those Who Remain: The Relationship of Job Attitudes to Attributions of the Causes of Turnover.

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The study examined the attributions of employees in seven agencies of state and county government concerning the reasons for turnover among their fellow employees. Participants in the study were asked to indicate which of three possible reasons was the most important cause of turnover in their agency. Attributions about the causes of turnover were examined in relation to employee attitudes, behavioral intentions, and investments in the organization. The results suggest that employees with positive job attitudes were less likely to indicate that others left because of		

10. Abstract (continued). job dissatisfaction. This finding is consistent with both the ego-defensive and ego-centric biases in attributions processes, but not the fundamental attribution error.

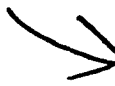
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### Abstract



The study examined the attributions of employees in seven agencies of state and county government concerning the reasons for turnover among their fellow employees. Participants in the study were asked to indicate which of three possible reasons was the most important cause of turnover in their agency. Attributions about the causes of turnover were examined in relation to employee attitudes, behavioral intentions, and investments in the organization. The results suggest that employees with positive job attitudes were less likely to indicate that others left because of job dissatisfaction. This finding is consistent with both the ego-defensive and ego-centric biases in attribution processes, but not the fundamental attribution error.



Turnover in organizations has been the subject of numerous studies and theory building in recent years (cf., Mobley, Griffeth, Hand & Meglino, 1979; Muchinsky & Tuttle, 1979). With few exceptions, recent research on turnover has focused on the antecedents or causes of turnover behavior from the perspective of the employee deciding to stay or leave. These investigations have attempted to determine the reasons why employees voluntarily leave organizations by assessing job-related attitudes and perceptions prior to the point of termination. Researchers have generally failed, except in the earliest pilot stage of study, to utilize current employees as sources of information about why other employees leave the organization. Moreover, few studies are available that consider the possible consequences of turnover for remaining employees.

The importance of viewing turnover from the perspective of those who remain in the organization has recently been suggested by Steers and Mowday (in press). They indicated it was important to investigate how remaining employees develop naive causal models to explain turnover by co-workers because beliefs about why others leave may have important implications for how remaining employees react to turnover. In other words, understanding the cognitive processes used by remaining employees to develop beliefs about the reasons for turnover in the organization represents an important step in investigating the consequences of turnover for individuals.

Attribution theory was identified by Steers and Mowday (in press) as one useful theoretical framework for attempting to explain how remaining employees develop beliefs about the reasons for turnover by co-workers (cf., Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelly, 1973; Ross, 1977). The growing research on attribution processes suggests several general attributional tendencies that may effect how remaining employees develop explanations for why others leave.



What has been termed the "fundamental attribution error" by Ross (1977) suggests that people are more willing than they should be to believe that a person's behavior is indicative of his or her attitudes (cf., Jones, 1979). This suggests that employees who remain in the organization may be likely to view the decision by a co-worker to leave as reflecting the leaver's attitude toward the job. Those who remain in the organization may simply interpret the reasons for turnover by others as low job satisfaction or low commitment since these attitudes would be consistent with the act of leaving.

There are other reasons to expect, however, that remaining employees may not adopt the simple hypothesis that others leave because they are dissatisfied. Two biases which have been found to operate in attributional processes suggest that remaining employees may develop distorted beliefs about why others leave (cf., Ross, 1977). First, the ego-defensive bias has been found in situations where another person's behavior is potentially threatening to an observer's self-esteem or self-concept. Turnover by others may be psychologically threatening to remaining employees because the act of leaving represents a rejection of the job. Remaining employees may have to reconcile their own decision to stay with the knowledge that others have found the job undesirable. Rather than re-evaluate their own decision or feelings about the job, remaining employees may simply cognitively distort the perceived reasons why others leave so that the action becomes less threatening. Second, the ego-centric or false-consensus bias suggests a general tendency to view our own feelings or beliefs as appropriate and widely shared by others. Remaining employees may have a general tendency to view others as possessing attitudes similar to their own and thus interpret the reasons for turnover in ways consistent with their own attitudes

The attribution biases discussed above suggest several competing predictions about how remaining employees would interpret the reasons for turnover by co-workers.

The fundamental attribution error suggests that remaining employees will view the act of leaving as indicative of the attitudes of those who left. This would be likely to result in the belief that others leave because they are dissatisfied with the job. In contrast, both the ego-defensive and ego-centric biases suggest that remaining employees may come to view the reasons why others leave in ways more consistent with their own attitudes toward the job. In other words, remaining employees with positive job attitudes would be less likely to believe others left because of dissatisfaction. Although the ego-defensive and ego-centric biases lead to similar predictions, it should be evident that they are based on different cognitive processes.

The purpose of this study was to investigate relationships between beliefs about why employees voluntarily leave the organization and the job attitudes of employees in the organization. Several job-related attitudes were studied, including job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment. In addition, the intention and desire to leave should be related to attributional processes in a manner similar to job attitudes. Finally, relationships between beliefs about the reasons for turnover and tenure in the organization and perceived ease of mobility were investigated. It was thought that employees with a greater investment in the organization or who believed they could also leave but chose not to do so would find turnover by others potentially more threatening. These employees may also be less likely to believe that others leave the organization because of job dissatisfaction.

#### Method

##### Subjects

Participants in this study were  $N = 569$  lower-level employees working in seven agencies of state and county government in a Midwestern state. The sample was largely composed of female employees (81%) working in a variety of entry-level

health care or clerical tasks. The average age of participants was 37 years and average length of tenure was 6.3 years. Most participants had at least some college education. Missing data reduced the sample size to  $N = 540$ .

### Measures

Reasons for turnover. The introduction to the question about the reasons for turnover reminded participants that several of their fellow employees had voluntarily left the agency to take jobs in other organizations. Employees were then asked to indicate the reason they thought was most important in explaining the turnover that had taken place in their agency. Responses were made by checking one of three possible reasons for turnover: 1) "people most often leave because they are dissatisfied with their job;" 2) "people most often leave to take a more attractive job elsewhere even though they were not dissatisfied with their job in this agency;" 3) "both reasons are equally important." These causes of turnover, while not exhaustive of the possible reasons why people leave organizations, were thought to reflect the "push" vs. "pull" distinction commonly made in research on turnover.

Job attitudes and investments. The level of employee commitment to the organization was measured using Porter's 15-item instrument (see Mowday, Steers & Porter, 1979 for validity and reliability data on the instrument). Coefficient alpha for commitment in the present study was  $\alpha = .90$ . Job satisfaction was measured by three items taken from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Package (Nadler, 1975). The items measured general satisfaction with the job and working in the organization ( $\alpha = .86$ ). Job involvement was measured using the short-form of the instrument developed by Lodahl and Kejner (1965) ( $\alpha = .74$ ). Employees indicated their desire ("all things considered, I would like to find a comparable job in another organization") and intent ("I will probably look for a new job in the near future") to leave the organization on 7-point Likert-type response formats.

Perceived ease of mobility was measured using an approach developed by Schwab and Dyer (Note 1). Employees were asked to indicate the extent to which such factors as their job experience, age, education, sex, and so forth would either "hurt my chances to find a job" or "help my chances to find a job." Responses were made on a 5-point scale and perceived ease of mobility was the average of the eight items assessed in the instrument ( $\alpha = .68$ ).

#### Procedure

Questionnaires were administered to groups of employees during working hours by members of the research team. Employees were asked to volunteer to participate in a study of employee job attitudes with the assurance that their responses would remain anonymous.

#### Results

Subjects were classified into one of three groups according to the reason they felt was most important in explaining turnover in their agency (i.e., most people leave because they are dissatisfied; most people do not leave because they are dissatisfied; both reasons are equally important). To examine relationships between beliefs about the reasons for turnover and the other measures, multiple discriminant analysis was run to determine whether the measures taken as a group significantly discriminated among employees grouped according to their attributions about the causes of turnover. The results of this analysis and the means and standard deviations on each measure for the three groups are presented in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 About Here  
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The results indicate that the reasons why employees felt that others in the organization had left were related to measures of employee attitudes. The discriminant analysis was significant for the first discriminant function

( $\chi^2 = 88.3$ , 14 df.,  $p < .001$ ), with 15% of the variance in the discriminant function explained by grouping employees according to their beliefs about the reasons for turnover. An examination of the standardized discriminant weights presented in Table 1 suggests that organizational commitment was the most important variable in discriminating among the groups, followed by job satisfaction. The discriminant weights for the other variables were small relative to the weights found for commitment and satisfaction.

#### Discussion

The results of this study suggest that employees who held more positive attitudes toward their job and organization were less likely to believe that turnover in their agency was caused because leavers were dissatisfied. If the fundamental attribution error had been operating in these data, we would have expected to find more than 31% of the employees indicating that others left because they were dissatisfied. It appears that employees may not automatically interpret the behavior of turnover as indicating the leaver's attitudes toward the job. The finding that beliefs about the reasons why others leave were moderately related to the attitudes of employees also would not be predicted by the fundamental attribution error. The results of this study appear more consistent with both the ego-defensive bias (i.e., employees distort beliefs about why others leave to protect their own decision to remain) and ego-centric bias (i.e., employees assume others hold similar job attitudes and develop beliefs about the reasons for turnover consistent with this assumption).

Although the results with respect to attitudes appear consistent with both attribution biases, the fact that tenure in the organization and perceived ease of mobility did not strongly contribute to discrimination among the groups when the effects of the attitude measures were controlled appears to favor an interpretation based on the ego-centric bias. This interpretation must be

treated with caution, however, since it is based on the untested assumption that turnover by co-workers is potentially more threatening to higher tenure employees and those who perceive a greater ease of mobility. It is possible that the ego-defensive bias in attributions may be more likely to operate in situations where the person leaving is well-known and respected by the remaining employee than when turnover is treated as a general phenomenon.

It should be apparent that this study represents a rather exploratory effort to investigate some of the cognitive processes used by employees to develop beliefs about why others leave the organization. This study presented employees with a limited choice of possible reasons for turnover. In addition, employees were asked to think about turnover in general terms rather than focus on the reasons why a particular individual left. While viewing turnover in general terms may be sufficient for investigating general attributional tendencies, such an approach leaves ambiguous the causal nature of the relationships and does not allow a number of additional research questions to be answered. Future research may want to more carefully specify the referent of turnover so that the impact on beliefs of such factors as characteristics of the person leaving, situational factors surrounding turnover, and relationships between the leaver and the person forming beliefs can be considered. In addition, future research may want to focus upon relationships between attitudes and turnover beliefs among supervisory samples. Finding a systematic relationship between the job attitudes of supervisors and their beliefs about why subordinates leave suggests a more serious problem for organizations since it is supervisors who often have the responsibility to act on their beliefs in taking corrective action to reduce future turnover.

#### Reference Note

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Table 1  
Mean Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions for Employees  
Grouped According to Attributions of the Causes of Turnover

	Perceived Reasons for Turnover			Standardized discriminant weights
	People leave because they are dissatisfied	Both reasons important	People do not leave because they are dissatisfied	
Organizational commitment	4.03 (1.15)	4.76 (.93)	5.04 (.87)	-.83
Job satisfaction	4.52 (1.76)	5.46 (1.39)	5.91 (.94)	-.41
Job involvement	3.40 (1.13)	3.73 (.99)	4.08 (.99)	.05
Desire to leave organization <sup>a</sup>	3.44 (1.97)	2.76 (1.60)	2.69 (1.68)	.01
Intent to leave organization <sup>a</sup>	3.81 (2.17)	2.91 (1.89)	2.67 (1.93)	.16
Perceived ease of mobility	3.67 (.55)	3.69 (.62)	3.71 (.54)	-.11
Tenure in the organization <sup>b</sup>	65.6 (68.8)	77.9 (88.6)	87.8 (91.8)	-.10
Sample size	166	291	83	

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

a Higher mean indicates greater desire or intent

b Tenure measured in months

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